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Abstract
With the possible exception of V. S. Naipaul's Mr Biswas, no other character in West Indian fiction is as well-known and well loved as Sam Selvon's Moses Aloetta. Moses is the central figure in three of Selvon's novels, and his adventures in London and Trinidad span a crucial thirty years of contemporary West Indian migration to Britain. The Lonely Londoners (1956) details the fortunes (and misfortunes) of Moses and his fellow West Indians in the metropolis in the early years of West Indian mass migration. By the time of Moses Ascending (1975) generational 'indigemsation' of West Indians in Britain, independence, and Black Power movements had altered the London scene. West Indians had gained an often uneasy foothold in 'the motherland' and Moses is now the owner of his own house, though (not untypically) his fortunes suffer a reversal at the end. Moses Migrating (1983) builds on this contemporary relation between a more 'indigenised' generation of West Indians and their 'ancestral' island homelands, and like many of his contemporaries and their British-born progeny, Moses returns to Trinidad for Carnival.
HELEN TIFFIN

'Under the Kiff-Kiff Laughter': Stereotype and Subversion in *Moses Ascending* and *Moses Migrating*

With the possible exception of V. S. Naipaul's *Mr Biswas*, no other character in West Indian fiction is as well-known and well loved as Sam Selvon's Moses Aloetta. Moses is the central figure in three of Selvon's novels, and his adventures in London and Trinidad span a crucial thirty years of contemporary West Indian migration to Britain. *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) details the fortunes (and misfortunes) of Moses and his fellow West Indians in the metropolis in the early years of West Indian mass migration. By the time of *Moses Ascending* (1975) generational 'indigenisation' of West Indians in Britain, independence, and Black Power movements had altered the London scene. West Indians had gained an often uneasy foothold in 'the motherland' and Moses is now the owner of his own house, though (not untypically) his fortunes suffer a reversal at the end. *Moses Migrating* (1983) builds on this contemporary relation between a more 'indigenised' generation of West Indians and their 'ancestral' island homelands, and like many of his contemporaries and their British-born progeny, Moses returns to Trinidad for Carnival.

Without ever denying - indeed often foregrounding - colonial and post-colonial West Indian experiences of racism, poverty, marginalisation and abuse in London, Selvon, through his figurations of Moses, offers hilarious, good-humoured, complicated, healing novels of racial and colonial interaction whose radically subversive strategies are hidden 'under the kiff-kiff laughter'.

In an interview in 1979, Selvon noted that:

> The comedy element has always been there among black people from the Caribbean. It is their means of defence against the sufferings and tribulations that they have to undergo. I always felt that this is a very strong element indeed and it is too easily brushed aside by well-meaning critics who feel that the funny story has its place but it is just so much and nothing more. I think it is a great deal more.'

Under the 'kiff-kiff laughter' then, the purpose of Selvon's intricately ironic novels is serious. A number of critics have noted the complex
tonal modalities of *The Lonely Londoners* and examined the subversive strategies of *Moses Ascending*. But *Moses Migrating* has generally been ignored or dismissed as a lesser sequel to the 1975 novel, having little to add beyond the prolongation, into the 1980s, of the adventures of a now popular Trinidadian character.

But to imply that Selvon’s three ‘Moses novels’ constitute a trilogy is to ignore important differences between them; differences related not only to changing times, but to major shifts in tone and technique between the earlier *Lonely Londoners* and the two later works. While the former is character-centred and generally realist in mode, the later works are increasingly focussed on a more general exploration and interrogation of the role of representation in the construction of colonial subjectivities. In *Moses Ascending* and *Moses Migrating* Selvon turns to examination of racist and colonialist stereotypes and their most naturalised figure, the cliché. Consequently the later novels are more broadly satirical in mode, and Moses himself is represented as a much more extreme product of the processes of colonialist interpellation than he was in the earlier novel. And while *Moses Ascending* and *Moses Migrating* share this anatomisation of the stereotype in colonial discourse, they address the matter through rather different topoi.

In 'The Other Question' Homi Bhabha argues that a primary strategy of colonialist discourse is the circulation of the stereotype, which, through its repetitive ‘fixity’ renders the colonised ‘knowable and visible’. Anti-colonial discourses have thus focussed on exposing the effectivity of the stereotype, on destabilising its apparent ‘fixity’ and on unmasking the imperialist anxieties which underlie and energise its still efficacious repetitions. But as Bhabha argues, to

judge the stereotyped image on the basis of a prior political normativity is to dismiss it, not to displace it, which is only possible by engaging with its effectivity; with the repertoire of positions of power and resistance, domination and dependence that constructs the colonial subject (both colonisers and colonised).

In *Moses Ascending* and *Moses Migrating* Selvon recirculates and reanimates racist and colonialist clichés and stereotypes, interrogating and destabilising them through partial, ironic and/or incomplete inversions of the binary codes which are foundational to both the production and the persisting potency of such stereotypic figurations. In unmasking and dismantling stereotypes of both colonisers and colonised, frequently by ‘collapsing’ one into the other, Selvon relies primarily on his (re)figuration of Moses in the later novels as an almost absurdly interpellated colonial subject, ‘obedient’ (to use Pechaux’s term) to the point of caricature. The ironic distance between Selvon and Moses is thus far greater in the two later works than it is in *The Lonely Londoners*, and both texts focus more on an investigation of colonial and post-
colonial subjectivities than on presenting a 'realist' account of West Indian experiences in London or English travellers in Trinidad.

In colonialist discourse the potency of the stereotype depends not just on its fixity and its endless repetition but on the binaristic codifications that serve as its inescapable foundations. Such rigidly maintained binaries as coloniser/colonised; masterslave; white/black; 'European'/'native' are, of course, also hierarchised. Interpellated and 'obedient' colonial subjects like Moses represent the fulfilment of colonialist desire; they are products of an apparently perfected imperialism which, to borrow from Macaulay's 1835 Indian Education Minute, has produced 'Indians in blood and in colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.'

But this 'perfected' colonial subjectivity is inherently destabilising of those very hierarchised binaries upon which the ideology of empire and colonial governance rests, since paradoxically such 'ideal' subjects necessarily annihilate those very divisions by which their subjectivity is constituted. Moses' taste(s), opinions, morals, intellect, (and, one might add, affiliations and loyalties) are, he believes, white and English. But Afro-Trinidadian in 'blood and colour' Moses' Anglo-affiliative speech and behaviour occasionally produces a degree of self-mockery and constantly attracts the derision of others - West Indians and Britons alike. It is not only through Moses' split colonial subjectivity however that Selvon interrogates stereotypes and their binary bases. In both Moses Ascending and Moses Migrating comedy, irony and subversion are enacted through a series of narrative inversions, intertextual and historical ironies, which unsettle stereotypical figurations and the hierarchies which provide their foundation. Characteristically however, these inversions are never fixed or completed but produce further inversions and upsets which energise more vortices of spiralling instabilities.

In Moses Ascending the black poverty-stricken foreign 'migrant' (who is not quite 'foreign' and has come 'home' to the motherland; and is thus not really a 'migrant' either) becomes landlord and resident, owner of a 'great house' in London, renting rooms to other Commonwealth 'migrants'. Man Friday thus becomes Crusoe, inverting those paradigmatic stereotypes which were reflected in and widely disseminated through Defoe's influential 1719 work. Landlord Moses takes on, as helper/servant, the illiterate English Bob from the 'Black Country' of the white heartland (the Midlands) of England. (And Moses resolves, like Crusoe, 'to teach' Bob The Bible when he 'have the time'). Inversions of the roles of master and servant; white and black; coloniser and colonised here serve to denaturalise the stereotypes and their hierarchisation; to expose their constructedness, their interested representational foundations.

But these 'inversions' are neither neat nor completed, both because of
Moses' 'split' colonial subjectivity and because he is still in so many ways a relatively powerless black immigrant in a white country. Moses' 'house' is already condemned when he buys it. In *Moses Ascending* he thus inhabits the positions of both owner and tenant; master and servant; coloniser and colonised; black and white. At the end, in spite of his retention of the ownership of the house, he has been (re)relegated to the basement by a now literate Bob, in possession of the 'tools' of representation, having, ironically, been taught these by Moses.

Such an interplay of ironic reversals produces wonderful comic effects and serves to erode the binarist foundations of the stereotype itself, without surrendering the novel's political purchase. (To suggest that in a post-imperial metropolitan context, the West Indian had become 'landlord' would be (if salutary) idealist and politically irresponsible). Moses is thus never really accorded status as resident and landlord in English 'society'. Though he is (as an obedient 'white') opposed to the black power ideology of Brenda and Galahad, he is the 'test' arrested at the rally and though Moses has to teach Bob his own language, once he does so, Bob regains control and, Caliban/Friday-like, Moses is exiled to his own basement. He still owns his (slum) property in the metropolis, but it is really Bob in the penthouse who has the upper hand. Using the stereotype of the 'English gentleman' - a figure to which Moses aspires and to which he is certainly closer than Bob - Bob is able to appeal to 'English' morals in punishing Moses for his sexual exploits with Jeannie. In the face of all evidence to the contrary, the working class Bob, always eager to have sex with any female and constantly harrassing (black) Brenda, invokes a useful English 'stereotype' (to which he assumes himself entitled by 'race and birth' but which the novel challenges) to send a chastened Moses (more sensitive to the mythology of the English gentlemanly code) back to the basement.

But in *Moses Ascending* and *Moses Migrating* Selvon also targets that particular form of language associated with the stereotype - the cliche. In the contemporary world clichés, perhaps more than any other figurations, perpetuate the stereotype through the ways in which they have been naturalised, 'unconsciously' absorbed into everyday speech. Selvon takes up the clichés, repeating, recycling and subversively rewriting it with spectacular comic effect: 'It does seem to a black man that though he is as pure and white as the driven snow ... it got something, somewhere, sometime, what he do wrong, and that even if it don't exist, the police would invent one to trap him?'. The persistent repetition (with significant variation) of clichés about both blacks and whites, as well as their interrogation and dismantling through action and dialogue in the novel is again both delightfully comic and radically subversive.

In *Moses Migrating*, fed up with his basement accommodation and his 'apple cart' (the complicated metaphoric connections between economic
status in Trinidad and London, apples, serpents, and 'having your apple cart upset' are significant) Moses decides to return to Trinidad for an initially unspecified period. Once again Selvon is primarily concerned with the continuing power of stereotype and cliché and with destabilising their binaristic bases. His technique is again broadly one of comic/ironic spiralling inversions enacted through episodes of role-reversal and cross-dressing, though, as in Moses Ascending, such inversions are always qualified, always unstable. Moses is again figured as the deeply interpellated colonial subject who (usually in spite of himself) occupies both binaristic stereotypes, and so too (in a minor key) does his English foil, Bob. While Moses is (provisionally) elevated to the status of gentleman, master and Briton, English Bob is frequently represented in the stereotypical roles of servant, dupe, 'savage', ill-educated bore. (In both Moses Ascending and Moses Migrating Selvon unpicks the 'seamless' stereotype of the white colonising Briton through his representation of Bob and Jeannie; through Moses' experience and knowledge of British class and regional divisions; and through contrasts between the language of 'high' English culture and literature and contemporary vulgar London speech). But in spite of his experience of Bob and his detailed knowledge of the metropolis, Moses of Moses Migrating still clings determinedly to the imperial stereotype, to the era when Britannia 'ruled the waves' and her civilising missionaries could never have succumbed to sea-sickness.

Where Moses Ascending focussed on the master-slave relation (and the 'mastertext' of Robinson Crusoe), Moses Migrating uses the topoi of movement and migration to unsettle colonialist stereotypes which are based on inflexible oppositions between race purity, ancestral lineage and the 'mongrel'; 'native' and 'foreign'; 'home' and 'abroad'; tourist and resident. It also addresses (both implicitly and explicitly) the relationship between economics and empire, culture and migration and persisting econo-cultural cliches: 'Coin of the realm'; 'two sides of the coin'; 'streets paved with gold'; and the myth of El Dorado and the economic disillusionment of West Indian workers in London.

Two primary motivations energised the massive colonialist migrations of the last four centuries. Voyages of Europeans to the Caribbean were generally motivated by the promise of economic gain and mass migrations to Europe by the colonised (and formerly colonised) in the twentieth century were similarly sponsored by a hope of economic improvement. Both 'migrations' were underpinned by two powerful myths - the myth of El Dorado and the imperial myth of the metropolis where streets would be 'paved with gold'.

But a second imperial mythology underlay colonial migrations to Britain - the myth of the 'mother' country with all its implications of welcome and affiliation which had been sponsored by the nineteenth and twentieth century rhetoric of empire (mothers and children, sisters
and brothers) and deliberately fostered, in the twentieth century, in educational curricula. The rhetoric of 'the family' and the 'mother country' denied those racial differences upon which the ideology of empire itself rested. As the colonial 'chickens' came home to roost in the imperium, however, their experience was, well, a horse of a different colour. Whiteness, Englishness, biological ancestry were what really mattered. The would-be children were received as unwelcome and uncivilised rough colonials; foreigners, not residents.

Yet these (re)turning colonials were both 'children' of the Empire and foreigners within it; closely related and no relation at all; black and white, their parentage both genetic (biological) and Anglo-representational. As Moses tells us:

Up to this moment I have never told a soul the truth about my past, that I was born a norphan, and left to my own devices to face the wicked world, deposited on the doorsteps of a distant cousin in an old wicker basket, and nearly get tote away by the dustman and dump in the labasse. It was childless Tanty Flora ... who took me under her wing and gave me the name Moses ...

Moses' biological ancestry may thus be rather obscure, but his cultural and representational ancestry is here exposed as a direct European lineage through fairy tales and nineteenth century accounts of infants abandoned on 'the doorstep' in wicker baskets(!) to the Biblical Moses in the bullrushes. Moses Migrating thus examines questions of biological and cultural allegiances; migration and ancestral origins, concepts of 'blood' and 'home'; exploration, and its contemporary manifestation, tourism, and the foreigner and 'native'.

At the beginning of Moses Migrating Moses has decided to return to Trinidad, and Bob and Jeannie resolve to accompany him as tourists. To prepare for this journey into the 'wilds' with their 'native informant' Moses, they purchase what they regard as appropriate clothing. Dressed as the stereotypes of the European explorer 'on safari'; they appear before Moses as representations of representations. Asked to inspect and approve these outfits, ('I don't want to go around looking like a proper Charlie,' Bob says ), Moses acts like a colonel reviewing the troops. The passage is a lengthy one, but it illustrates the intricate ironic interplay of Selvon's re-citation/re-sitation of colonialist clichés and stereotypes and their radical destabilisation:

Jeannie had on leather boots coming up to her knees, a thick furry-looking midi-skirt belted at the waist, a white cotton shirt, a colourful bandanna round she neck, and one of them cork hats like what you see film stars wear on safari. The hat was trim with mosquito-netting material, like what demure brides wear. Bob, standing at her side, had on heavy, black boots, white stockings up to his hairy calves, a short pair of khaki drill trousers, a safari jacket with a pipe sticking out of the top pocket, a cork hat like Jeannie but without the veil, and he was sloping arms with a great elephant gun.
Oh, and both of them were wearing giant sunglasses, so big almost covering their faces.
I did not laugh. I looked them over appraisingly. I went and do a parade inspection, straightening Bob’s hat, patting and turning down the flap of the pocket over Jeannie’s left breast, then I stood in front of them, frowning a little. ‘Well?’ Bob say.
‘Assume those are your costumes for playing Carnival?’ I ask.
Bob frown now. ‘It’s our tropical gear.’
‘It might do for Port-of-Spain,’ I say, ‘but when you get into the interior the natives will laugh at you. You’ll have to discard all that.’
‘You mean walk around starkers?’ Jeannie ask interestingly.
‘I won’t have that,’ Bob say. ‘It’s okay for Moses if he wants to revert, but we have to toe the line somewhere.’

Ironic treatment of the notion of reversion (‘going native’), categories of explorer and indigene, resident and tourist, black and white are here subjected to ironic inversion and dissolution. (Bob, meaning that (as representative white) he will have to maintain imperial ‘standards’, remarks that ‘we have to toe the line somewhere’ when of course he means ‘draw the line’). And there is the further irony that Moses, not Bob and Jeannie (who are going as tourists, purely for pleasure), is the one with the ‘civilising mission’ - to set an ‘example’ to his countrymen and to reassure them that in spite of the decline in the value of the English pound, Britannia still ‘rule the waves’.

If Moses begins the voyage - a kind of backwards sailing of the middle passage - in a third class cabin with Bob and Jeannie in first class, he nevertheless ‘migrates’ (on the advent of Bob’s mal de mer) to the floor of the upper class cabin (with Jeannie). Allowed into this section at her behest, then taking Bob’s place in ‘entertaining’ her and indeed wearing Bob’s clothes, he is consequently annoyed to find that Bob and Jeannie have cast him as their servant. Once again, Moses is represented by Selvon as protean, unwittingly resisting in his movements and manoeuvres during the voyage, the stereotypes which pervade the language and which still remain fundamental to the thinking of the English and West Indian passengers and to Moses himself.

As both returning ‘native’ and civilising explorer, Moses, on arrival in his Trinidadian ‘homeland’ does not rush off to Tanty Flora’s house but stays at the Hilton with Bob and Jeannie, once again inhabiting both the roles of tourist and son of the soil. Moses’ identification with such ostensibly antagonistic stereotypes and his comic vacillations between them is further emphasised by his discovery that the orange seller he can see from his Hilton window is not the ‘picturesque’ market woman beloved of the tourist, but Tanty Flora (to whom, as a foundling, he is both related and not related). Moses rushes across the road to a not-so-touching scene of reconciliation, when Tanty angrily rejects his generous offer to buy all her oranges with his English pounds. Moses is keen to represent this scene to himself however, as such scenes should be
represented: 'Laugh if you want. I don’t care. That’s the way it happen. I may be hard-boiled and black, but tender is the night, and I am not abashed to confess that poignant moment in the sunlight' (p.64).

In ironic contrast to Moses' lack of interest in 'roots', white 'imperialist'/tourist Bob has a personal mission in Trinidad: to trace his ancestry, since he has heard of possible white planter connections. When, in following this biological trail Bob discovers a (black) skeleton in his (English) closet, binarist concepts of race, ancestry, civilised/savage, home and foreign are inverted and thus destabilised and displaced. Moreover, Bob's deep investment in a biological ancestry is rendered almost comically simplistic in the context of the complications of the cultural/representational/biological 'ancestry' of an interpellated colonial subject like Moses. Blood and colour are demonstrated by the novel to be a very small factor in any consideration of self-identity, and Moses rightly dismisses Bob's 'revelation' as the minor matter it clearly is. But in its comedic destabilisation of colonialist stereotypes relative to race-purity, 'motherland', migrancy, exploration and travel, Moses Migrating attests to the continuing power of these 'stereotropes' at the same time as it critiques the simplicity of binarist categorisations in comparison with the complex linguistic and cultural 'ties that bind' the colonial subject.

It is through Moses' carnival costume that Selvon brings together his critique of colonialist stereotropes. Initially Moses does not intend to play mas, but having considered the available avenues for prosecuting his 'civilising mission' he reasons that a carnival costume demonstrating his unshakable faith that the 'coin of the (English) realm' is still the 'real McCoy' is the most fruitful course to pursue.

The representation of Britannia (or the King's or Queen's head) on coins offers an example of a near literal stereotype - one that is also iconic of empire and foreign rule as it operates as everyday 'exchange' in the lives of colonial subjects. In George Lamming's In the Castle of My Skin school children discuss at length the 'technology' by which the King's head is 'impressed' on a coin, inquiring into the processes and power by which the icon is 'fixed' and endlessly circulated as currency. In Moses' decision to dress not just as Britannia but as the representation of Britannia on the English penny Selvon not only demonstrates the historical connection between money and colonialism (and mocks Moses' contemporary civilising mission to support the English pound) but does so in the form of an almost literal stereotype that symbolises basic modes of exchange in a colonial context, one with its foundations in slavery where Africans were literally European exchange/coin. Moreover English Britannia - female symbol of (white) British power - is here represented by a black male Moses.

But Moses is persuaded by Tanty and Doris to involve Jeannie as a white hand-maiden and Bob as the 'slave' who will pull Britannia's
chariot. He rationalises these additions as suitable support for the English symbol, but the Carnival judges and audience, far from apprehending the pageant as pro-British and currency supporting, read his representation subversively - as a counter-colonial inversion of the historical hierarchy. His costume also carries a reminder of the ironies of British educational practice where West Indian children were obliged to learn by heart and sing on school parade grounds the anthem 'Rule Britannia, Britannia rule the waves/Britons never never shall be slaves.' Moses' 'obedient' gesture is thus interpreted by his Trinidadian audience as deeply disobedient, and he wins the prize.

But there is a further twist to Moses' Carnival costume and performance. In his masquerade of Britannia, Moses literally represents both sides of the coin (significantly he has to have white English Bob pull his chariot round to demonstrate this to the judges) and in so far as he thus renders a static image (a stereotype) mobile, and provokes the opposite interpretation from that which he intended, his performance is metonymic of Selvon's mobilisation and destabilisation of stereotypes and stereotropes in Moses Migrating. Through his novels, Selvon puts both sides of the coin back together, as it were, and sets it spinning.

But it is not just the stereotropes of empire and their colonial and post-colonial repetitions of which Selvon is critical. In Moses Migrating he also interrogates counter-colonial strategies which invoke racial, national, or 'nativist' essentialisms - strategies still rooted in the same binary codifications and thus dealing in (neo) stereotypical figurations. So Moses resists the trajectory that seems to be leading him 'home' to (little) Doris, the trajectory of an essentialist return to 'roots', in favour of an ambivalent return, as a 'norphan', to his 'other' 'London' home. There, brandishing his 'holy grail' (the Carnival trophy) as proof of his loyalty to the realm (though it was awarded for his subverting of the historical paradigm) Moses as both traveller and resident, returning child and foreign migrant, waits as the English entry officer goes off to check his passport.

NOTES

1. Peter Nazareth, 'Interview with Sam Selvon', World Literature Written in English 18, 2 (1979), pp.423-424.
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8. *The Housing Lark* (1965) offers an example of the way in which Selvon takes a cliché (chickens coming home to roost) and elaborates it, denaturalising it by giving it historical grounding, and then placing this history in ironic or inverted relation to the present:

'By the time the coach reach Hampton Court you would think the party went out for the day and now coming home to roost in the palace (p.112). The West Indians are indeed the colonial 'chickens coming home to roost', taking possession of their rightful inheritance, that which their education taught was theirs while their skins/bodies/history relegated them to the status of colonised others. The play on poultry/poetry, the echo of the English expression 'chickens coming home to roost' is elaborated over the next five pages. The West Indian visitors/owners imagine Henry VIII himself looking out the window and sizing up his chicks - his women (all envisaged as existing simultaneously) and this 'historical' imaginative flight is followed by: 'And suppose Old Henry was still alive and he look out the window and see all these swarth characters walking about in his gardens!' (p.117-118) - not his 'chicks' now, but the 'chickens come home to roost' the return of a history of exploration, genocide and exploitation that began in the Renaissance period.


10. Ibid., P.10.